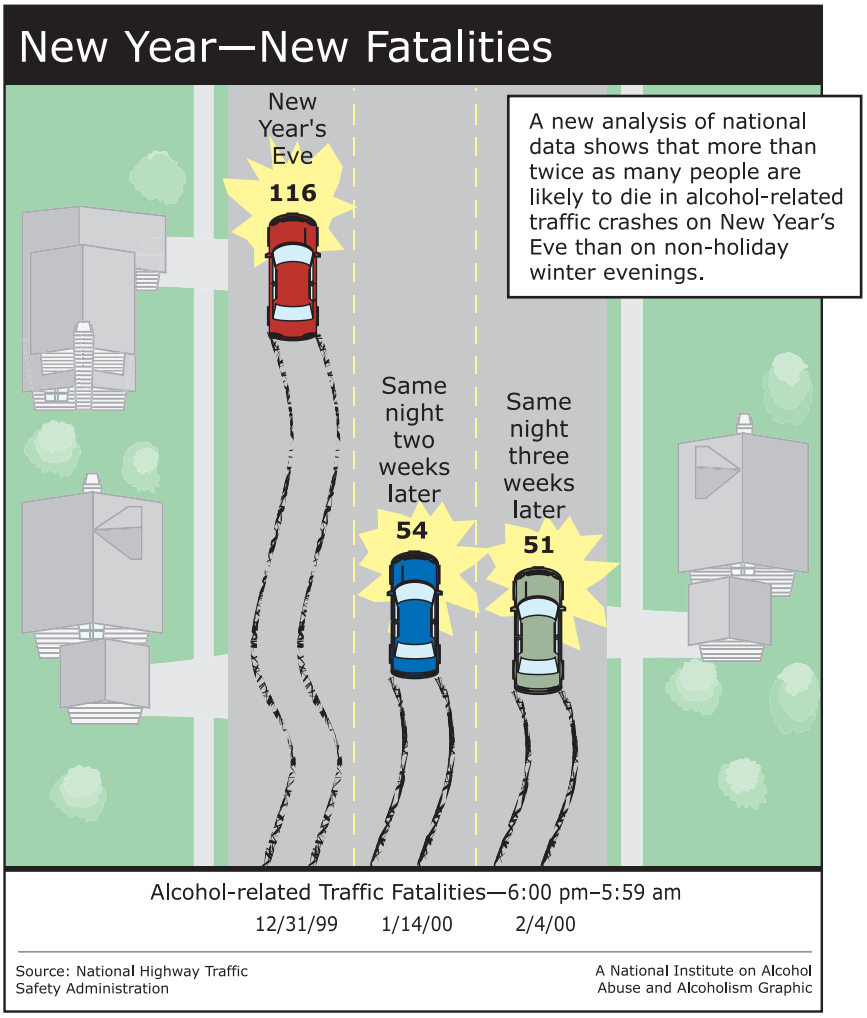
New Year, Old Myths, New Fatalities

Alcohol-related Traffic Deaths More Than Double on New Year's Eve—Yet Myths About Drinking Live On

Some New Year's predictions are, tragically, very reliable. For example, significantly more people are likely to die in alcohol-related traffic crashes on New Year's Eve than on other non-holiday winter evenings.

Just look at the numbers. A new analysis of National Highway Traffic Safety Administration statistics shows that, by the time our country finished ringing in the year 2000 (the last year for which data is available), 116 people had died in alcohol-related traffic crashes in the 12-hour span between 6:00 p.m. on New Year's Eve and 5:59 a.m. the next morning. Two weeks later, on the same night of the week, the death toll was 54, a dramatic drop of more than 50 percent. Three weeks after that, the number dropped to 51.

While this simple comparison is not a complex statistical analysis, it clearly demonstrates the increased risks we all face on that night.



Correcting the Myths

Possible reasons for the greater number of alcohol-related traffic fatalities on New Year's Eve are that a lot more drinking goes on and that partygoers believe a lot of myths about drinking—myths that, for some, can prove fatal. Scientific studies at the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAAA) on the effects of alcohol on our brain and body functions provide important information that challenges many of these commonly held—but incorrect—beliefs.

Sometimes New Year's celebrants think they can get home safely just by driving the speed limit, staying in their lanes, and obeying traffic laws. If only that were true! The fact is that driving demands sound judgement and sharp reflexes to prepare for the unexpected: a driver changing lanes or a pedestrian darting across the street are just two examples. Sound judgement and sharp reflexes are the very skills at immediate risk after even one drink. And the dulling of reaction time to the unexpected and the disruption of eye-hand coordination persist for longer than people realize.

Even When Drinking Stops—Alcohol's Effect on Brain Function Does Not

The brain starts reacting to alcohol with the first sip and keeps on reacting until well after the last drink. Although its first effects feel stimulating, alcohol ultimately serves as a depressant. This effect results in a lack of self-control and loss of the ability to make good decisions. With more drinks and time, speech becomes slurred, coordination is lost, and behavior becomes uncontrolled and uncontrollable. Continued drinking can lead to unconsciousness and in the worst case, large amounts of alcohol are toxic and can kill.

Many New Year's Eve partygoers believe that when they have stopped drinking for the night, maybe waited an hour or two and had a strong cup of coffee, the effects of alcohol will clear. The truth is that alcohol continues to affect the brain and body long after the last drink has been downed. Judgement and coordination can be impaired for up to 12 hours or more after drinking. Furthermore, a night of heavy drinking can leave the body in a hyperactive state, marked the next day by profuse sweating, increased sensitivity to light and sound, and anxiety—all conditions that make driving and other complex activities difficult, even if the person no longer feels "drunk." Heavy drinking is also associated with poor sleep that leaves the drinker sluggish and further impairs driving ability the next day.

Although scientific studies have documented what alcohol does to the body, myths about drinking live on. In the sidebar on the right, NIAAA exposes some myths about drinking and the human body. The fact is there's no way to speed up the brain's recovery nor are there quick cures for a hangover. So this New Year's Eve, NIAAA urges you not to underestimate the effects of alcohol. Don't believe you can beat them. And especially, don't drink and drive.

Sobering Up and "Curing" Hangovers Myths and Facts

Myth: Drink coffee. Caffeine will sober you up.
Fact: The body needs time to metabolize alcohol, and even more time to return to normal. There are no trick cures—only time will help.

Myth: Take aspirin and drink a lot of water at bedtime to prevent a hangover.
Fact: Water helps with dehydration, but aspirin can make your stomach hurt—and acetaminophen (Tylenol) can be toxic to a liver soaked with alcohol.

Myth: Eat before going to sleep to soak up the alcohol and prevent nausea.
Fact: Food does more the morning after, especially foods with complex carbohydrates (such as cereals and breads) that help replenish blood sugar and ease an upset stomach.

Myth: A morning drink will help cure a hangover ("hair of the dog" theory).
Fact: This short-term "cure"only feels good because your brain is reacting to alcohol. You can only get back to normal by getting alcohol out of your system.

NIAAA
National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism
www.niaaa.nih.gov